

## CLAIMS

What is claimed is:

- 1 1. A packet header for use in information packets transmitted within a computer  
2 network comprising a protocol extension field that indicates changes of field values and/or  
3 lengths within the header.
- 1 2. The packet header of claim 1 wherein the protocol extension field comprises two  
2 bits.
- 1 3. The packet header of claim 2 wherein a value of 00 in the protocol extension field  
2 indicates that the packet header is unaltered.
- 1 4. The packet header of claim 2 wherein a value of 01 or 10 in the protocol extension  
2 field indicates a predetermined change in the content and/or length of the header.
- 1 5. The packet header of claim 2 wherein a value of 11 in the protocol extension field  
2 indicates dynamic negotiation of the field values and/or size.
- 1 6. A communication protocol for a computer network comprising packets having  
2 headers configured to include an indication of whether or not field values and/or lengths  
3 thereof have been altered from a preestablished norm.
- 1 7. The communication protocol of claim 6 wherein the headers include protocol  
2 extension fields, the values of which may be used to indicate whether or not the field values  
3 and/or lengths have been altered.

1 8. A method comprising indicating to components of a computer network whether  
2 field lengths and/or values of packet headers associated with communication packets  
3 transmitted between the components of the network have been altered using protocol  
4 extension bits included within the headers.

1 9. The method of claim 8 wherein a value of 00 for the protocol extension bits  
2 indicates that the packet headers have not been altered.

1 10. The method of claim 8 wherein a value of 01 or 10 for the protocol extension bits  
2 indicates that a predetermined change in the content and/or length of the headers has been  
3 made.

1 11. The method of claim 8 wherein a value of 11 for the protocol extension bits  
2 indicates that a dynamic change in the content and/or length of the headers is being made.

1 12. The communication protocol of claim 7 wherein a value of 11 for the protocol  
2 extension bits indicates that a dynamic change in the content and/or length of the header is  
3 being made.

1 13. The communication protocol of claim 12 wherein different components of the  
2 network may use protocol extension bits values of 11 for packet header structures unique to  
3 the corresponding component.